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ABSTRACT

A native language renewal program at the Macy, Nebraska Public School is described that is designed to preserve Omaha, a native American Indian language that is only a generation away from extinction. At the time of this research, only about 100 fluent Omaha speakers lived on the Omaha Reservation in Nebraska. The language and culture program, instituted in 1970, has employed various instruction techniques and methodologies, including immersion, memorization of words and phrases, and publication of student-authored stories in English and Omaha. The program has suffered from a lack of consistency; frequent changes in funding, personnel, and curriculum; and a lack of attention to syntax, morphology, and conversational competence. Although the program has not been successful in preserving Omaha as a living spoken language, it has helped to improve tribal solidarity and pride. Nearly every child knows at least some Omaha words and phrases, and the classes have provided satisfaction and a sense of pride for children and elders. In addition, many teachers at the school believe that the program has led to better attitudes and academic performance for at least some students. The program may enhance Omaha cultural survival and enrich the educational experience of the children. (Author/JL)

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OMAHA LANGUAGE PRESERVATION IN THE MACY, NEBRASKA PUBLIC SCHOOL*

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Umoⁿhoⁿ (Omaha) is a dying language. Like many other Native American languages, including several of its Siouan relatives, Omaha is in all likelihood just one generation away from extinction. A dramatic decline in number of speakers and contexts of use has occurred in just the past two or three generations. While exact figures are not available, there appear to be about 100 fluent speakers on the Omaha Reservation, in northeastern Nebraska, and a few more scattered in Omaha, Lincoln, and other cities. All of the fluent speakers are elderly. Many middle-aged Omaha Tribe members know a few words of Omaha, but younger adults generally do not, and tests of kindergardeners entering school in Macy, Nebraska, the most solidly Omaha town on the Omaha reservation,[1] indicate virtually no knowledge of the language among young children. The woman I sat next to at a Senior Center lunch in Macy a few days ago told a typical story. Her parents spoke almost no English, and she herself "couldn't even say yes or no" until she was sent to school at the age of eight. She is fluent in English but prefers Omaha. Her daughter understands and can speak Omaha, but is more comfortable in English. Her grandchildren, who are in their thirties, know no Omaha. Fourteen years ago Wallace Chafe reported that Omaha had "a thousand or more speakers, some of whom may still be children" (1976:28), but even at that time this figure must have included a large number of non-fluent or semi-fluent speakers.

However, although most tribe members do not speak Omaha fluently, the language remains important to tribal consciousness and is used ceremonially in speeches on public occasions such as feasts, funerals, Native American Church services, and the annual Powwow. Omaha is not obligatory on these occasions; some speeches are made in English, and often there is at least a summary or preview or both in English for the benefit of those who do not understand Omaha. Sometimes a speaker who is fluent in both Omaha and English will even repeat a whole speech in both languages. But Omaha is felt to be most appropriate if the speaker is able to use it. Knowledge of traditional names, kinship terms, and other vocabulary items is considered a crucial key to retention of cultural identity. Because of its cultural importance, some elders and others have become concerned enough about the impending loss of the language to institute an Omaha language renewal program in the Macy public school. This paper describes and evaluates the school's language preservation efforts, including both oral language classes and written projects.

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1. Oral language classes

An Omaha language and culture program for elementary school children was begun in 1970, and some sort of instruction in spoken Omaha has been available in the school during most of the nearly twenty years since then. However, the program has suffered from a lack of consistency, with frequent changes in personnel, funding, and curriculum. In particular the degree of emphasis on language as opposed to general tribal culture has varied widely. At one point in the mid '80's an immersion approach to language instruction was briefly tried (the first fifteen or twenty minutes of each day was to be conducted totally in Omaha); this failed due to the inability of almost all of the teachers at the school to speak Omaha themselves. At most times language instruction appears to have been limited to isolated nouns and routinized activities such as counting and greeting. Pretests administered at the beginning of the 1987-88 school year indicated that most students could count to ten in Omaha but very few of them could say the word for "seven" without counting up to it.

During the past two years, the only period I have personally observed, the program was funded by Title IV and coordinated by Mr. John Mangan, a teacher and director of the school's printshop. This fall Mr. Mangan was returned to full-time classroom teaching. No new director had been selected as of the end of September, leaving the program in limbo, in spite of continued federal funding. However, the teachers, after a month of uncertainty, have returned to the classroom on their own, so classes are continuing.

Four tribal elders, Clifford Wolfe, Bertha Wolfe, Coolidge Stabler, and Mary Clay, are employed as teachers at the elementary school, and two others, Valentine and Winifred Parker, teach at the junior high. The elders conduct daily twenty-minute sessions with small groups of students, the men meeting with groups of boys, and the women with groups of girls. These "culture classes" are obligatory for all students from first grade on, and include some instruction in traditional skills and stories as well as language.

Language lessons tend to emphasize memorization of words and phrases, and the teaching method is translation ("who remembers how to say '...'?"). However, some effort is made to drill simple sentence formation as well. On March 7, 1989, for instance, the lesson consisted of ten lexical items: eyes, nose, mouth, (human) ears, (animal) ears, hair, shirt, pants, shoes, and socks; and sentences using these words with the verb abǫ̃į 'I have' and some previously learned numbers and colors: nąxíde nąba abǫ̃į 'I have two ears', ištá nąba abǫ̃į 'I have two eyes', nąžíha sábe abǫ̃į 'I have black hair', níduše žíde abǫ̃į 'I have red pants'. The next day's lesson included counting to 100 by tens and simple noun phrases with wiwítta

'my' and ðiðíttą 'your': síɳuda wiwíttą 'my dog', ságe ðiðíttą 'your horse'.

The classes are conducted almost entirely orally, although some written materials are used from time to time. No textbook of Omaha exists. A phrase book with exercises (Marshall 1978(?)), a brief Omaha-English dictionary (Swetland 1977) and an even briefer illustrated wordbook (Cook 1982) are available, and the school itself has produced a large number of bilingual readers (see below for discussion of these). However, most of the elders are themselves not comfortable with reading and writing Omaha, and make only occasional use of written materials.

The success of these classes is mixed. The good news is that they seem to generate considerable enthusiasm, particularly among the youngest children. The first graders in groups I have observed are very attentive, volunteer to talk, and eagerly participate in group recitations. Among the older children such overt enthusiasm for a school subject is not "cool" -- however, even many sixth graders do seem to enjoy the language lessons. Parents and grandparents also derive satisfaction from the oral language classes; the teachers receive frequent positive comments from family members whose children have brought home Omaha words from school.

The bad news is the amount of actual Omaha fluency achieved by the children. Some vocabulary is learned, but very little grammar, and none of the children I have observed have the ability to carry on a conversation in Omaha. There are several likely reasons for the failure to achieve proficiency. Omaha language and culture is studied only 15 or 20 minutes a day, and is not integrated into other areas of the curriculum. Neither the teachers (elders) nor the coordinator have any background in linguistics or language pedagogy. Together with the lack of textbooks, this results in grammatical structures not being taught in any organized fashion. Perhaps most importantly, there is no follow-up on what is learned from one year to the next. As mentioned above, the program has previously suffered from a lack of continuity. At present, the elders prepare just one elementary school lesson each day and use it with all grades, so there is little incentive for older children to move on to more sophisticated language. Observation of classes indicates sixth graders do not know much more Omaha than first graders. The junior high instructors work independently and do use other materials, but they too seem to start virtually from scratch each year.

Nonetheless, the classes do provide some exposure to the sounds and patterns of the language, as well as positive contact between elders and children, and may serve to enhance self concept and overall school performance; I return to this point in more detail in the next two sections.

2. Translated stories

In addition to oral language classes, the school has encouraged Omaha language learning through a series of printed projects. Most of these are stories written in English by elementary school pupils,[2] translated into Omaha by the elders, and published by the school's printshop as illustrated booklets with Omaha and English texts on facing pages. A typical page is shown in Figure 1. Illustrations are done either by students or by a local artist, Mr. Thurman Cook. The student authors' names -- usually both their English and their Omaha names -- appear on the booklet's cover, and the stories are videotaped with the young authors reading their own stories in both English and Omaha. Packets of booklets are distributed to all teachers at the school for classroom use; the extent to which they actually are used varies from one teacher to another. The videos are used in the classroom and also broadcast over the school's cable television channel. This last practice has elicited an enthusiastic response from the children's families, who sometimes request that the video broadcast be repeated several times.

The translated stories, in both their printed and videotaped forms, have obvious value in encouraging student writing. The children write the stories voluntarily and are proud of the public recognition they receive. Each story that is published results in more stories being submitted; about a dozen translated stories have been published to date, and the printshop has a backlog of another dozen stories at various stages in the process of being translated, illustrated, and printed. As someone who has struggled with teaching composition at the college level, I can attest that simply getting students to write on their own is a major achievement. Teachers have commented that students who have written stories seem to have an improved attitude toward school in general.

In addition, although most of the stories are not about traditional Omaha culture, they do foster a sense of tribal identity. The stories provide some exposure to the language, and give some prestige to the Omaha-speaking elders who do the translations. The student authors get practice pronouncing spoken Omaha in making the videotapes. And the non-traditional nature of the stories itself reinforces the idea that Omaha is a real language, capable of being used for purposes other than formal speeches in specified contexts. In at least one case a story booklet had a very direct effect on the retention of "Indian ways" by the child who wrote it. The author of "Carlos in the Printshop" had not yet been given an Indian name at the time when his story was published. Discussion of the fact that he had no Indian name to put on the title page led his family to formally give him his Indian name just a few weeks later.

Thus, the stories clearly play a useful role in the education of Macy's children, both in terms of attitudes toward school and academic skills, and in terms of Omaha cultural awareness. However, their usefulness in helping the

Blackie likes to chew bones.

Çabeaka wahi thaxthixtada.

FIGURE 1

children achieve Omaha language proficiency is less clear. The stories do have the advantage (unlike most of the material presented in culture classes) of exposing the student to connected discourse, including full sentences with conjugated verbs and other grammatical forms. They are potentially very good teaching tools, if used as the basis for discussion by a native-speaker teacher.

But there are a number of shortcomings which make it very difficult to learn much Omaha by studying the bilingual texts alone. First, and perhaps most important, the translations tend to be quite inexact. In some cases the Omaha translation includes words or ideas that are not literally present in the English version. For instance, in (1) most students would know that inąha means 'my mom', but might well be baffled by the meaning of the other words. How could three words mean 'I help'?

1. i^{n}o^{n}ha wathito^{n} ueka tamike (Susie, p. 7)[3]
   inąha waðíthą uékkę-tta-mįkhe
   my mother work I help her with it-will-I sitting

   literal translation: 'I will help my mother with her work.'
   booklet translation: 'I help my mom.'

In other cases the reverse is true; an example in which the Omaha translation includes less information than the English original is given in (2). Here a student would look in vain for a word for 'homework'.

2. Ebthishto^{n}ki ... (Susie, p. 17)
   E bðíštę-kki
   that I finish it-when

   literal translation: 'When I finish that ...'
   booklet translation: 'After I do my homework...'

The above examples are given in two orthographies: the first line in each case is the spelling given in the booklet Susie, from which both (1) and (2) are taken, and the second line is a phonemic transcription. The spelling system of the booklets is that used by Fletcher and LaFlesche in their 1911 ethnography, The Omaha Tribe. This alphabet has the advantage of being somewhat more familiar to community members than the other orthographies that have been used to write Omaha; it is used in some signs in public buildings in Macy, for instance, the sign Umo̧ho̧ Tapuçka over the front entrance of the school building. However, it is not an ideal alphabet for Omaha. It does not distinguish [s] from [z] (both spelled ç), [x]

from [γ] (both spelled x), or aspirated stops [t^h, p^h, k^h, c^h] from geminate stops [tt, pp, kk, čč] (spelled t, p, k, ch); in addition, it does not write glottal stop; and spells nasal [ã] as either o^n, u^n, or o.[4] Stress is not marked. These are not major barriers to reading the language (after all, people do manage to read English, with a much less transparent orthography!). But they do make it difficult for non-Omaha speaking students to learn pronunciation from the booklets.

Another difference between the first two lines of examples (1) and (2) is in division of words. The booklets tend to spell enclitics and particles as part of the same word as their phonological hosts, but sometimes separate them. The same e 'that' which is written as part of the word in (2) is separated from its host with a hyphen in the phrase e-agipaxe tamike (é agíppaxe-tta-mi̧khe) 'that I will do my own', on the preceding page of the same booklet. The phonemic transcription used here writes enclitics with a hyphen and all other elements as separate words. Again, such inconsistencies would not be a problem for native speaker readers, but they do make the system unnecessarily opaque for non-native learners.

The booklets contain no glossary or other notes to aid in deciphering the lexical, morphological, or syntactic structure of the Omaha sentences. A simple glossary of the words used in each story (even without morphological divisions or uninflected forms of the words) would greatly enhance the ability of the books to be used without a native speaker always being present -- for instance, for students to review the booklets at home after going through them in class. It would likely make even classroom use with native speaker teachers easier. The elders with whom I have worked often have great difficulty explaining what a particular word in a sentence means.

The producers of these materials realize that they are not likely to create any true speakers of Omaha. In the introduction to one of the most recent booklets, "Mother Doe and Baby Fawn" (April 1989), John Mangan writes: "We do not expect the children of the Omaha tribe to be able to learn to speak their language fluently from reading this series of books, but in working with them they will get the feel for the vocabulary and make-up of the language, and realize that their language is a living concept that can be used in everyday situations." In other contexts[5] he has expressed the realistic goal of the books as "Omaha literacy, not Omaha fluency".

3. Untranslated stories

The most recent of the printshop's projects is a series of several booklets of stories written in English, but incorporating Omaha words and cultural themes. The stories were written as a culture-class project; both the stories and some of

the booklets' titles ("Stories from our Youth", "More Stories from our Youth") are modeled on an earlier collection, "Stories from our Elders", which was used in the culture classes.

I will examine in detail one booklet of seventh graders' stories, "More Stories from our Youth". Figure 2 is a reproduction of a page from the booklet. Like the translated stories, this booklet is clearly valuable as a means of encouraging students to write and take pride in their writing, and as a way of giving prestige and visibility to the Omaha language and culture. However, it also stands as a monument to the very small amount of Omaha these adolescent tribe members actually know after six years or more of study. The glossary of the booklet consists of only fifteen words -- of which eight are animals and five are used only as personal names in the texts. Although students were encouraged to use Omaha words or phrases, six of the sixteen stories use no Omaha at all, and many of the others use only one or two Omaha words. The total usage of Omaha in the 20-page booklet, including words used in the titles of stories, is as follows:[6]

3.

word	gloss	number of tokens
Umo^{n}ho^{n}	Omaha	14 (4 stories)
sho^{n}ge	horse	11 (3 stories)
Ishti^{n}thi^{n}ke	Trickster/Monkey	9 (2 stories)
i^{n}gthu^{n}ga	cat	8
xithaska	white eagle	6
paçon	bald eagle	6
Wako^{n}da	God	5
xitha	eagle	3
izhazhe	name	2 (2 stories)
mixazhi^{n}ga	duck	1
çiçika	turkey	1
wazhi^{n}ga	chicken	1
wiwitate	my	1
ti	house	1
çabe	black	1

The form wiwita 'my' is given in the booklet's glossary alongside wiwitate, glossed 'my when used in a sentence'. I omit it here, as it does not appear in the text of the booklet. Wiwitate is simply wiwítta 'my' plus the article te (the). Both wiwítta and wiwítta-the can be used in sentences.

With one exception, the syntax of these stories is entirely English. The single

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Bruce Drapeau

Ishti^{n}thi^{n}ke Proves Himself
By Bruce Drapeau

Once upon a time there lived a little boy named Ishti^{n}thi^{n}ke. He always stole from his friends and relatives and always told lies about the tribe. He had a sho^{n}ge and its izhazhe was Luke. Every day he took his sho^{n}ge to a river near the tipi. He always liked to fish for the fun of it. He didn't even kill food for the tribe.

When it was his first buffalo hunt he carried a staff for the hunters. When he went he brought four buffaloes back and the tribe was proud of him for bringing the food to the tribe.

Then he married the chief's daughter and had a good wedding. And the tribe trusted and cared for Ishti^{n}thi^{n}ke. Whatever happened to him they would all cry for him.

One day a ceremony was held in a tent. They all wanted Ishti^{n}thi^{n}ke to come. In this way he could earn his first feather for bravery and trusting to the tribe.

FIGURE 2

Omaha syntactic construction is the sentence in (4), which was undoubtedly memorized as a "chunk". All of the children have learned and practiced saying "my name is ___".

4. Izhazhe wiwitate Jamie (iží́že wiwítta the Jamie)
   name my-the
   'my name is Jamie'

In all other cases, Omaha words are fitted into English constructions with English word order and no morphological complexity. Since nearly all of the Omaha words in the text are nouns, the constructions in question are NPs. In an Omaha noun phrase, determiners and all other non-sentential modifiers follow the head N; English of course is just the reverse. This leads to constructions like those in (5):

5.a. det-N:
   a/his/the sho^{n}ge — cf: sho^{n}ge aka (sá̧ge akhá)
   horse the
   'the horse'

b. number-N:
   two mixazhi^{n}ga — cf: mixazhi^{n}ga no^{n}ba (mí́xa žigá ná̧ba)
   duck two
   'two ducks'

c. (det)-adj-N:
   a black i^{n}gthu^{n}ga — cf: i^{n}gthu^{n}ga çabe (igðá̧ga sábe)
   cat is-black
   '(a) black cat'

A particularly interesting example is (6), in which both the noun and the modifier are Omaha, but they nonetheless appear in the English order.

6. Quinrea's çabe i^{n}gthu^{n}ga
   is- black cat
   'Quinrea's black cat' (cf. (5c))

These junior high students are writing pidgin Omaha, at best. It is particularly noteworthy that no Omaha verbs appear in the stories -- with the exception of sábe 'black', a stative verb which translates as an adjective. Verbal morphology is quite complex in Omaha, as in many other Native American languages. It is easy to plug an uninflected noun into an otherwise English sentence, but virtually impossible to do so with a verb. To use a verb you need to

conjugate it, with appropriate subject and object markers, and often one or more modal, auxiliary, or instrumental particles or other incorporated elements. The Omaha verb contains much of the information in the sentence -- indeed, it can be the sentence, all by itself. It is impossible to speak even rudimentary Omaha without knowing verb morphology. But it is precisely this kind of grammatical knowledge that the Macy school students are not learning.

The stories in More Stories from our Youth and the other similar booklets, with their traditional themes based on tales recounted by the elders, are excellent as an exercise in culture awareness. Their role in helping students to become better writers and take more interest in school is certainly valid and valuable. But their contribution to Omaha language retention or revival is minimal.

4. Conclusion

The effectiveness of all of the Macy school's efforts to revive or preserve the Omaha language is mixed. If the aim is to keep Omaha alive as a viable spoken language, widely used for everyday communication by tribe members, the program seems doomed to fail. Lack of attention to syntax, morphology, and conversational competence make it highly unlikely that the present "culture class" methods will produce any fluent speakers of Omaha. Inexact translations and other problems make the bilingual story booklets less useful as language learning tools than they might be. The language is not being passed on at home, or only in very few cases. I know of one child, a seventh grader, who apparently did learn Omaha as his first language and speaks it well -- but only one. For the other children the school program is their major source of knowledge of the Omaha language, and what they learn there is not sufficient to enable them to carry on a conversation.

However, if the aim is to use the language as a symbolic step toward tribal solidarity and pride in the Indian heritage, the program has a good chance of success. Both the classes and the printed stories do provide some exposure to the language. Nearly every child in the Omaha tribe at least knows some Omaha words and phrases. In addition, the classes and stories are a source of satisfaction and improved self-concept for both the children and the elders, as well as parents and other tribe members. Although hard evidence is not available, even teachers not directly involved with the language program have commented that success in the Omaha language activities and the resulting positive feedback from parents and peers has led to better attitudes and academic performance in other areas, at least for some students. Even if the program does not succeed in revitalizing the language, it may well enhance Omaha cultural survival, and enrich the educational experience of the children in the process.

Adult interest in language revival seems to be increasing as well. An Omaha language class offered at the Nebraska Indian Community College attracted a dozen students this year. Unfortunately, the adult education class suffers from the same problems as the elementary program: linguistically naive teachers and lack of appropriate written materials, leading to emphasis on isolated nouns, almost total disregard of grammar (morphology and syntax), and a very low level of proficiency achievement. Considerable time is spent on such things as memorizing the names of the clans, and virtually none on the skills needed to actually communicate using the language. But this class too does provide a seense of identity; a feeling that the traditional language is worth knowing, even if imperfectly, and respect for the elders who speak it well.

My comments on the elementary school language program have been quite critical, but I do not mean to give a negative overall impression of it. In fact, the program has had a positive impact on the level of Omaha proficiency of the young people: some is better than none. The volume of booklets and other materials created by the school's print shop is impressive, particularly when one realizes that they were produced essentially in a void: there were almost no Omaha teaching materials at all before this program began, and now we have a series of attractive booklets that children enjoy using. The program has received some national attention, being one of ten language programs recognized at the U.S. Department of Education's Indian Education Conference last year.

It is to be hoped that the current organizational problems will be overcome very quickly and a qualified director hired, so that the program can continue, improve, and perhaps even expand: a high school program would be a welcome addition.

NOTES

*I would like to thank John Mangan for providing me with much of the materials and information on which this report is based. Thanks also to Bertha Wolfe, Clifford Wolfe, Mary Clay, Coolidge Stabler, and the administration of the Macy school for allowing me to observe their culture classes, and to the students and staff of the Nebraska Indian Community College. This material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant Number BNS-8909283.

[1]The towns of Walthill, Winnebago, and Pender, while larger, have a much higher percentage of non-Indian and non-Omaha (especially Winnebago) inhabitants; Macy is the site of the tribal powwow and other cultural events and the center of Omaha tribal government.

[2]The authors of the booklets have mostly been in 6th grade, but include one

high school student and a few as young as 2nd grade.

[3]Examples (1) and (2) are adapted from Koontz 1988.

[4]A much more detailed discussion of this and other orthographies for Omaha can be found in Koontz 1984 and 1988.

[5]For instance, in a recent presentation to the Omaha Historical Research Project group.

[6]Spelled as given in More Stories from Our Youth. See discussion of orthography above.

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The story booklets produced by Macy School Print Shop: Susie, Carlos in the Print Shop, Mother Doe and Baby Fawn, More Stories from our Youth, and others are available from Mr. John Mangan, Macy, Nebraska 68039.